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GUEST VIEWPOINT

Old politics won't cure the nation's energy woes

By REP. SHERWOOD BOEHLERT

The American public is quite reasonably seeking relief from high gasoline prices. Congress ought to be responding by taking a comprehensive, thoughtful look at energy policy -- both supply and demand -- to see what we can do not only to limit prices now, but to avoid even worse situations in the future.

Unfortunately, very few people in Congress seem willing to do this.

The Democrat leadership is offering little but populist rhetoric; on the Republican side, some of the most vocal members are largely seeking the revival of bad ideas that have failed to be enacted in the past. The American public deserves better.

Having yet another vote on drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) does not constitute creative or long-range thinking about a balanced energy policy. Having yet another vote on refinery legislation that uses high oil prices as an excuse to weaken environmental protections and to give more legislative gifts to the oil industry is misguided in the extreme.

In fact, Congress already took steps to increase the supply of oil and other fuels in the Energy Act that its supporters were bragging about just last summer. I didn't support that bill, but do its supporters now see nothing in it of value?

We need to move now on two related fronts. We need to reduce or at least limit U.S. demand for oil as quickly as possible, and we need to develop new technologies that can further help address our addiction to oil in the future.

It's crystal clear where we need to start on the demand side. The U.S. uses most of its oil for transportation. We can limit U.S. demand for oil by requiring automakers to use the technology that already exists to improve fuel economy -- technology that the automakers refuse to bring into the market despite societal demand.

That is a classic market failure that the government ought to address. The National Academy of Sciences has made clear that mileage can be increased significantly with current technologies and without reducing safety.

We ought to take the same kinds of steps to require appliances and buildings to be more energy efficient. That won't do much for gas prices -- little oil is used to generate electricity -- but it will help our nation become more energy secure overall.

And then we need to invest more in coming up with new technologies that can move us away from our dependence on gasoline. Three obvious areas that require more investment are plug-in hybrids, biofuels and hydrogen. Our House Science Committee will be reviewing ideas on how to increase our investment in those areas, and we expect to move legislation swiftly.

On hydrogen, we will be considering Congressman Inglis' bill to offer prizes to create a new incentive to advance hydrogen technology. That bill could probably move very quickly. On

biofuels, the president has led the way with his Advanced Energy Initiative, which Congress should enact and expand. On plug-in hybrids, more and more communities across the country are interested in this technology and we need to do more to promote it.

We cannot build a strong energy future by relying on weak ideas from the past. I hope the energy debate broadens as Congress has more time to think about this issue. Right now all we're seeing is a reflexive fight and flee response -- fighting old battles and fleeing from the real issues. That has to change.

Boehlert, R-New Hartford, is chairman of the House Science Committee.